THE ABBÉ PRÉVOST AND THE JESUITS

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One of the most interesting chapters in the story of the lively religious controversies of the early eighteenth century is that of the Abbé Prévost's treatment of the Jesuits in his eight-volume novel *Le Philosophe anglais*. Only the first four volumes were published in 1731. These left unfinished the story of the English philosopher, Mr. Cleveland, and it was not until 1738–39 that Prévost brought out four more volumes which concluded with the conversion of the philosopher to what he designates as "true religion."

After the publication of the first part of the novel, Prévost was involved in a series of controversies with the Jesuits because he had satirized that order through his characterization of Father Ruel.[1] The second part of the novel gives a much kindlier interpretation of the Jesuits. Whether this contrast is due in any measure to the angry protests of that order or in some measure to the change in Prévost's relation to the Catholic church are questions that cannot be arbitrarily answered. We do know that he wrote the first four volumes when he was an exile from France and from the church because he had left the Benedictine monastery at Saint-Germain-des Pres without permission and that before he published the continuation volumes, he had been forgiven, received again into the order, and had settled down to a quiet life of writing and translating and acting as chaplain in the household of Prince Còonti.

No one who reads the story of Cleveland's first meeting with Father Ruel can wonder that the Jesuits took offense at the characterization: an ecclesiastic with an entirely worldly view of religion and an unprincipled casuist.

Father Ruel comes to Cleveland with an important message from the Duchess of Orleans, a matter concerning Cleveland's property in England. Having disposed of this business, he states that he has a still more important mission, for the Duchess has told him of the many misfortunes of Cleveland and of his failure to find consolation both in philosophy and in the religion presented to him by a Jansenist priest and by a Protestant minister.[2]

[1] Paul Hazard, *Études critiques sur Manon Lescaut* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1929), pp. 60–62; Henry Harrisse, *L'abbé Prévost: histoire de sa vie et de ses oeuvres* (Paris, Levy, 1896), pp. 238–244.

[2] *Le philosophe anglais* (Utrecht, Neaulme, 1736–39), V, vi, 139–143.

Father Ruel is not surprised that Cleveland has been thus disillusioned. There is no comfort, he says, in philosophy, which was never worthy of its name and is fit only for school-boys; and how can one expect to find help through a Jansenist or a Protestant? Then, this Jesuit offers to introduce Cleveland to the true religion, which is simple and easy, not obscure like that offered him at Saumur.[3]

The first step, he advises, is to distract the mind from sorrow by light reading, then to enjoy the pleasures of the senses, and also to fall in love. As an aid to finding a remedy for sorrow through love, the Jesuit introduces Cleveland to Ceçile, daughter of a Protestant neighbor whom Father Ruel is trying to convert to Catholicism.[4]

Cleveland's comments upon his first impressions of Father Ruel and upon his method of winning converts indicate that the Jesuits had some grounds for maintaining that their order had been maliciously satirized.

All he knew of the society, says Cleveland, was its name and some particulars which he had heard that did the Jesuits no credit.[5] The mannerisms of Father Ruel are those of a "churchfop": he speaks with gaiety and ease and liveliness which suggests this.[6]

When Cleveland tells the Duchess his impressions, she answers with words which the Jesuit order could scarcely regard as complimentary, although the Duchess herself seems to be sincere in regarding the Jesuits as agreeable people for these very characteristics. She replies that this manner not only fits Father Ruel but the greater part of the order and that, although she is not sure they would feel complimented to hear her say so, she likes them best of all the orders just because of these qualities. There are no other ecclesiastics that afford her so much diversion for they are so adaptable that everyone who has a taste for pleasure enjoys having them around; their presence gives sanction to a thousand pleasures which one can enjoy without remorse. They have made her actually love religion and feel it is not so severe a matter if it is as the Jesuits represent it.[7]

When Cleveland expresses reluctance to accept Father Ruel as a guide toward a religion that will meet human needs, the

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[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 144–149.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 151–162.
[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 145.
[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 145–146.

Duchess overcomes his objections with the argument that he will run no risk. "If you consider it only as an amusement, it will at the worst divert your mind from trouble. You little realize what comical creatures these Jesuits are."[8]

Feeling obliged to yield to the urgency of the Duchess, Cleveland enters into a series of experiences, which he tells us cause him to blush a thousand times at his own weakness.[9]

In guiding Cleveland's reading, the Jesuit tells him to put away his Plato and his Socrates and to substitute for them a French catechism written by the Jesuit Canisius, a book "hardly bigger than my finger" but a text which in less than an hour will give the reader as much knowledge as the doctors and the bishops possess; yes, even as much as the Pope himself. There is also another work, *Devotion Made Easy,* which is a guide to morality. In addition to such books of devotion, Father Ruel sends a whole chest of poetry, romances, and novels to amuse and to divert; he advises also a gay social life.[10]

When Cleveland finds that the books on religion offer no proofs that meet the tests of logic and that the poetry and romance is too trifling a distraction to take his mind from his griefs, he decides to reject all the advice of the Jesuit except that of becoming acquainted with Ceçile.[11]

The conversation that follows this decision presents as the Jesuit's argument much matter to which the order might justifiably object as unrepresentative and unfair. Father Ruel tells Cleveland that he is insisting upon demonstration, whereas in matters of religion simplicity and submission are more important.[12] He is glad to know that Cleveland will accept one piece of his advice and asks permission to report this to the Duchess. This Cleveland refuses and adds in plain words that now he sees that the Jesuit's efforts in his behalf are motivated not so much by zeal for his welfare as by Ruel's vanity and the desire to ingratiate himself with the Duchess.[13]

Sometime later in the story when the renewal of persecution of Protestants in France leads Ceçile's parents to plan to leave for England, Cleveland decides to go with them and intrusts a member of his household, Mme. Lallin, with the secret of his preparations.[14] In his zeal to make converts, the Jesuit uses

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 150.
[9] *Ibid.,* pp. 150–151.
[10] *Ibid.,* pp. 151–155.
[11] *Ibid.,* pp. 176–177.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 178.
[13] *Ibid.,* p. 180.
[14] *Ibid.,* pp. 197–211.

casuistic arguments to persuade Mme. Lallin, a Catholic, to betray this secret.

He presents this dilemma: this revelation either injures religion or does not injure it; if it injures religion, you cannot hide it without running the danger of hell-fire; if it does not injure religion, you are assured of the peace of your conscience, by revealing it to your confessor; and you do not run any risk by revealing it since it remains hidden under the seal of the confession.[15]

Mme. Lallin accepts these arguments and gives the information, but Father Ruel promptly breaks the seal of the confessional and goes so far as to attempt to prevent the escape from France by trying to influence the bishop to seize Ceçile and put her in a convent and to throw Cleveland in the Bastille. Only the archbishop's respect for Cleveland's influence at court through the Duchess Henrietta frustrates Ruel's plans.[16]

When Cleveland learns what Ruel has tried to do, he comments that the Jesuit was motivated by hatred and revenge, since three conquests of such importance would have flattered his vanity and the plans for escape robbed him of the hopes of making converts; nothing at that time, says Cleveland was more fashionable among the clergy than zeal for the conversion of their erring brothers, as they called them.[17] The tone here is obviously satirical.

Romantic entanglements, resulting from Cleveland's infatuation with Ceçile, conclude the fourth volume to which Prévost promised a continuation that he did not get around to publishing until 1738–39.

As far as Prévost's relations with the Jesuits are concerned, both the preface to these continuation volumes and his treatment of Jesuit characters in the rest of the story show a desire to make peace with the order, although the sincerity of what he writes might be questioned by some readers.

In the preface to the fifth volume of 1738, Prévost explains that he needed a vicious ecclesiastic in his plot and that he felt that nothing would hold the interest of the reader more than the exceptional instance of one vicious character in an order where one is not accustomed to find such a character. He then requests any reader of the first four volumes to correct his copy by erasing from the word Jesuit all the letters except "J". Finally he calls attention to the complimentary picture he has given of the Jesuits in the College de Louis le Grand.[18]

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 264.
[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 267–268.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 267.
[18] *Ibid.*, VI, "Preface," v–vi.

This is the preface to the volumes written after Prévost had returned to the Benedictine order.

The Jesuits enter the story in three ways in the four continuing volumes: the story of the vain and ambitious Father Ruel is concluded; Cleveland visits the Jesuit college to see his sons and discusses religion with the Père Recteur of the College du Louis le Grand; and after Cleveland's wife and daughter are converted to Catholicism, this same Père Recteur becomes their spiritual adviser.

All the episodes in which Jesuits appear show their zeal for making converts. They try to convert Cleveland and his Protestant friend Clarendon, but their zeal is that of sincere men, convinced that their religion is the only true faith. Cleveland disagrees with them, deals with them cautiously at times, makes some mildly satirical remarks with an attitude of amused tolerance, not with malice, and in most passages seems to respect the Père Recteur.

A few examples of the treatment of the Jesuits in these three groups of episodes will illustrate that they are treated in a manner which they have less cause to resent than in the case of the first four volumes.

On his death-bed, Father Ruel repents of his many machinations against Cleveland and his family. He confesses that his crimes were motivated by ambition and injured pride, for he felt that his prestige with the Duchess depended upon his winning Cleveland as a convert, and his vanity was mortally wounded by Cleveland's resistance to the efforts to convert him.[19]

Ruel further comments that the reason for corruption within so virtuous a body is that contact with the world they set out to reform brings strong temptations to the Jesuit to use the power of his profession so that it nourishes vanity and ambition.[20]

From Ruel's death-bed confession and repentance comes an ironic result: Gelin, who has tried to murder Cleveland and who is responsible for many of Cleveland's sorrows, is so impressed by Ruel's repentance that he is converted to Catholicism, becomes a Jesuit, and is the devoted tutor of Cleveland's sons.[21]

Whether Prévost was writing with tongue in cheek and saying in effect, "If you want this vicious Jesuit made good, I'll give you two good Jesuits by his repentance," no one can be sure.

[19] *Ibid.*, VII, xi, 201–202.

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 202–203.

[21] *Le philosophe anglais* (Rouen, Racine, 1785), VIII, xv, 230. The preceding references have been made to the Utrecht, Neaulme, 1736–39 edition because many passages concerning the Jesuits have been deleted in the Rouen, Racine, 1785 edition. Since no volume VIII of the Utrecht edition is available, the Rouen, Racine, edition is the reference wherever passages from volume VIII are used.

The treatment of the Jesuit school in the last two volumes is one of the evidences Prévost uses in his preface to support his assertion that he has given a complimentary picture of the Jesuits in the concluding volumes. But there are some reservations in Cleveland's mind when he visits the school.

Since Ruel's plots had placed the sons here as prisoners, it is hard for Cleveland to forget this fact now, even though the boys are perfectly free to come and go as they please after Ruel's schemes are frustrated. Cleveland feels a certain agitation as he enters the courtyard of the college and sees the great number of frocked men gazing at him with their sharp eyes.[22] He understands, he says, that men of character who live under the same discipline can not be either moderately good or moderately bad, but must be extremely one or the other. Such thoughts do not reassure him.[23]

In spite of these reservations, Cleveland is impressed by the college: the discipline is excellent; the children of the best families in France are found here in spite of the generally unfavorable attitude at that time toward the Jesuits. His comments to the Père Recteur give this Jesuit an opportunity to make a long dissertation upon the aims and purposes of the order. His discourse appears to be fairly represented, and upon it may rest Prévost's claim to have treated the Jesuits in a complimentary manner in these volumes.[24]

But what good opinions Cleveland forms of the school do not prevent his dealing cautiously with the Jesuits a little later in the narrative. This is when he is getting ready a second time to leave for England. He practices a mild deception in telling the authorities of the college that he is taking his sons on a visit to Rouen, instead of withdrawing them from the school, and he adds to some complimentary remarks on the college a present of a thousand pistoles.[25]

The Père Recteur stands in a dual relation to Cleveland's family, for not only is he head of the college the sons attend but he is also the spiritual adviser of Cleveland's wife, who has become a Catholic. When Cleveland's daughter is dying, she too embraces the Catholic faith through the guidance of the Père Recteur, and the narrative represents this Jesuit as being a great source of comfort to Mrs. Cleveland and in a lesser degree to Cleveland himself at the time of the daughter's death.

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[22] *Ibid.* (Utrecht, Neaulme, 1736–39), VII, xii, 293.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 294–300.
[25] *Ibid.* (Rouen, Racine, 1785), VIII, xv, 189–190.

Because of this intimate connection with the family, the Père Recteur enters into many conversations upon religion with Cleveland. Always he appears as a man zealous to make converts, but kindly, sincere, and conscientious. Cleveland is conscious that the Recteur hopes to convert him, and this is consistent with the ideas he already has formed of the man's zeal for his faith.[26]

When Lord Clarendon, with unusual liberality of mind, congratulates Mrs. Cleveland upon having found satisfaction for her spiritual needs in the Catholic faith, the Recteur is overjoyed by the prospect which he thinks he sees of another convert and says to Clarendon that he need look no farther than the way now open to him. Then, recklessly he adds that he would embrace Clarendon's religion if he did not know the excellence of his own. But Clarendon is not converted. He replies frankly that he would listen to the Recteur's expositions if the mass of useless questions which are obstacles to the triumph of truth could be removed. Although the Recteur appears to be delighted, he hastens to change the subject to an ordinary topic of conversation, in order, Cleveland explains, to avoid the discussion of useless questions which would not contribute to his purpose.[27]

In this same scene after Clarendon has spoken highly of the College du Louis le Grand and added that Cleveland might as well leave his sons there since the kind of religious instruction they receive makes no difference until they attain the age of reason, the Père Recteur, who, of course, does not agree with Clarendon, is ready to seize this opportunity of influencing the boys, even though he can not approve the reason for leaving them at the school. Cleveland notes the Jesuit's reactions with more amusement than malice.[28] Then, he adds that although he is satisfied with Clarendon's view, he does not think less of the Recteur for the secret views he attributes to him. Cleveland has always been inclined to judge religion on the grounds that justice and goodness are the necessary virtues, and he judges not only the personal integrity of the Jesuit but also the truth of his religion by his zeal.[29] There is a satirical ambiguity of a sly sort in those words.

Since the Recteur fails to convert Cleveland, Prévost has denied the Jesuits a complete apology for the harsh treatment that they received in the earlier volumes, but he has made some generous concessions in three conversions which would please the Jesuit readers and in a generally more kindly tone of the narrative wherever the Jesuits appear.

[26] *Ibid.* (Utrecht, Neaulme, 1736–39), VII, xii, 303.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 260.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 258.
[29] *Ibid.*

It would appear, however, that the controversy regarding the treatment of the Jesuits continued for four editions of *Le Philosophe anglais,* those of 1757, 1778, 1781, 1785, have been censored by the deletion or revision of passages concerning the Jesuits. That problem was treated in an earlier paper read before the Academy. When it is solved, it will make another chapter in the story of Prévost's relations with the Jesuits in the eighteenth century.